

Out of Hours

GP attitudes to migrant health care across Europe

RCGP JIC FINDINGS FROM THE WONCA CONFERENCE

The current refugee crisis is the biggest humanitarian emergency Europe has faced since the Second World War. Displacement has a devastating effect on the physical and mental health of refugees. WONCA Europe (representing family doctors and their member organisations across Europe) released a statement urging governments to take action '... so that all people living permanently or temporarily in Europe will have access to equitable, affordable and high-quality health care services'.¹

Unfortunately, the inadequate response of many governments to the crisis has obliged charities such as Doctors of the World (DOTW) to step in and provide urgent health care.

During the WONCA Istanbul conference in 2015, the RCGP Junior International Committee conducted a survey of family doctors' knowledge of migrant health and attitudes towards provision of health care. There were 45 responders (predominantly family doctor trainees) from 19 countries worldwide. Although almost all claimed to have a good understanding of the healthcare system in their country of work, 46% were unaware of the entitlement of different migrant groups. Indeed, 35% were unsure or did not know the difference between migrant groups (that is, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees). Despite this, 61% strongly agreed or agreed that they were aware of the additional health needs of migrants and 91% were aware of the problems that exclusion from health care can cause.

Importantly, 90% of doctors surveyed felt that migrants should be entitled to free primary care. However, there was mixed opinion regarding how services should be delivered, with 27% believing that charitable organisations should be responsible, whereas 44% felt that they should not.

EXAMPLES OF MIGRANTS BEING DENIED HEALTH CARE

A quarter of doctors had experienced migrants being denied health care because of their immigration status, and many acknowledged that migrants can have difficulty navigating the system or were fearful of the consequences of accessing care. One doctor from the Netherlands said: 'In the Netherlands there is special

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care for immigrants who don't have status, but most migrants don't know about it or they are afraid to visit a medical doctor.'

Another doctor from the Netherlands commented that, 'they (migrants) receive health care but not of the same quality'.

Doctors from other countries also reported witnessing substandard care. A doctor from Germany recalls an experience:

'At a refugee home ... a child with septic meningitis was not rushed into hospital because the porter didn't call a taxi/transport for them. The father then carried his child to a doctor. The boy survived but has suffered severe scarring and loss of fingers.'

A Belgian doctor commented on the high number of untreated post-traumatic stress disorder cases he has seen, while a doctor from Portugal spoke of unsupervised pregnancies.

In London, the DOTW run two clinics (located in Bethnal Green and Hackney), with advocacy services for migrants struggling to access health care. Despite being entitled, 82.7% of those who came to the DOTW clinic in 2014 had not been able to register with a GP, the entry point to the healthcare system.² The most often-cited barriers were administrative and legal (29%), lack of knowledge or understanding of the healthcare system and of their rights (17%), language barriers (14%), and fear of being arrested (11%).²

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Having worked in the clinic myself, I have experienced the confusion among primary care staff regarding the entitlement of migrants to care. Reception staff, as well as doctors, often do not know that anyone can register and consult with a GP without charge or documentation, and that there is no minimum period that a person needs to have been in the UK before a GP can register them.

This survey has revealed that family doctors from other countries have similar experiences to doctors in the UK. Despite the vast majority of the family doctors surveyed being in favour of free primary care for vulnerable migrants, almost half were unaware of migrants' entitlement to health care in their country of work.

Access to health care is a basic human right and should be a key priority for all governments in the face of the current refugee crisis so that non-governmental organisations are not depended upon to plug the gaps in services.

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